



It's just a spark (but it's enough to keep them going) by paupaipi

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Summary: Just Joyce Byers being the best mum in the world and the love of Jim Hopper's life. (English is not my first language so i probably won't make sense most of the time.)

1. After the gate is closed

It was very late when they got home, the lights were on and it was full of noise. The kids, Jim and Eleven were all there. They were all okay (except Bob, but she couldn't think about him in that moment, because if she did she was going to break and she was not ready to do it just yet). So, they were all okay. And suddenly it was like the nightmare was over, at least for that night, and Joyce felt like she could breathe again.

She hadn't even open the door when all the kids came out running and went to hug Will. And she found herself trap in the hug because she was the one helping Will to walk. He was okay, but he was exhausted. She was exhausted too. Maybe they were all exhausted she thought when she saw how Hopper gave her a tired smile as he watched her from the door.

Finally she convinced everyone to go back inside. All the kids crushed in the couches and started talking about everything that had happened. She sees Eleven and she's glad the little girl is okay, although she looks as tired as Will. But she let them have a moment, they deserve to have a moment with their friends after everything they went through.

And that is how she suddenly saw Steve's bloody face.

- What happened to you? - She asks him.
- Had a fight. - He looks embarrassed and like he doesn't want to talk about it.
- He did it for us, he saves us from my step brother. - Max explained, somehow she had been able to listen even if she was in the other corner of the living room with her friends.
- Come on, we'll clean it and put it some ice. - She says to Steve and make him follow her.

Steve tried to stop her. He said that is not that bad, that he was okay and he didn't need ice. But she knew better and she was not gonna let

him be a mess and suffer in silence in front of her. So she opened the freezer and that's how a body part of a demodog fell on her. She kinda jumped back and screamed, she couldn't help it.

- What the hell is this? - She asked, as everyone started to enter the kitchen. Hopper was by her side in an instant. He checked her to see that she was okay and then he examined the body part to see that there was nothing alive in it.

- Sorry, i told Dustin is was not a good idea. - Steve apologized.

- Dustin? - Hopper asked looking the boy for any explanation.

- Is for science Ms Byers. - He answered like it's the most obvious thing in the world. He directed his answer to Joyce, because the chief was looking really pissed and that couldn't be good.

- I don't care about science. - She said feeling angry. Was this boy real? She could see the exact moment that Dustin felt that he made a mistake on thinking she wouldn't be angry. She kinda felt sorry for the boy because she knew that he only did it for curiosity, but after everything that had happened she couldn't find any good reason to keep something from the Upside Down.

- But... - Dustin, Lucas and Mike started talking at the same time trying to give a good reason to keep it.

- Stop! - She didn't let them talk. - I don't want that thing in my home, and neither should do any of you. It's dangerous. - She gave them her best mum look that said they can't fight her on this.

- Don't worry mum, i'll take care of it. - Jonathan said and grabbed what's left of the demodog.

- Thank you sweetie. - She gave a smile to her older son, because she didn't know what she did to deserve such a great one.

- No more troubles, Joyce is right. - Hopper ordered the kids giving his best cop attitude. - I'm gonna go help him. - And then he was out following Jonathan and Nancy.

She gave some ice to Steve and helped him clean his face. The kids

didn't fight anymore about the demodog, instead they asked if they could stay for the night. She was not sure how everyone were going to fit in her home, but she was too tired to fight and the noise was good; knowing that they were all okay in her home gave peace to her trouble mind, so she said yes. All the boys accommodated in Will's room, and Max and Eleven in her room. After she made sure all of them were settle, she went outside to smoke a cigarette. A minute later Hopper was at her side, and she passed him the cigarette used to them sharing.

- We burned it. - He told her, referring to the demodog.
- Good. - She sigh feeling relieved. - Is El okay? - She asked, worried about the girl who looked as tired as Will.
- Yes, she's tired but she's okay. She was really great. - He answered feeling proud of how the girl closed the gate with her powers and grateful that they were okay. - Will? - He asked.
- He's okay too, just tired. Wherever was inside of him we took it out.
- She assured him.

They stayed in comfortable silence for some minutes as they finished the cigarette. They were good with that, the silences were always comfortable between them. They not always needed words, sometimes with simply just being side by side they were okay.

- Is it over? - She asked with her voice shaking because she was scared, but she needed to know.
- I think so, she closed the gate. - He said. - But i guess we can never be sure. - He was worried and he was always going to be, so he will keep watching to make sure the monsters stayed in their dimension.
- We'll keep looking just to be careful. - She said like she could read his mind. He nodded and lighted another cigarette. - So, you've been hiding her? - She was still in shock to find out that he had been hiding something that big from her.
- Yes. - He confirmed. - I'm sorry i didn't told you, but i didn't told anyone. I was just trying to keep everyone safe. - He explained

feeling nervous because she's giving him one of those intense looks that says "you better not lying or messing with me or i will punch you".

- I get that, but i could've help. And even if you were trying to keep everyone safe, i don't think insulating her was the best. - She said feeling frustrated. - Is this why you kinda disappear? - She was hurt when he started acting strange. He was never around when she called to his trailer or the police station, he was never there. He avoided her most of the times they cruce paths, so she started doing the same. If he didn't want her around, she was not going to insist. But maybe now she could know the reason, maybe she hadn't been the problem, maybe he did it just because he didn't want to lie to her.

- I did? - He knew he did, but he didn't thought it was that bad. But seeing her now, really seeing her he realized maybe he had hurt her. Not that it was ever his intention. He knew he could have done things a better way, but he really did all he could and thought it was the best at the moment. - I'm sorry, i never meant to do it. Is just with taking care of El and trying to stay sober, i really didn't have time and i didn't wanted to trap you into my problems. - He said being sincere.

- You always help me with Will, i could have help you with El. - She said after taking some time to think about everything.

- You're right. - He knew she was right. He knew she would had helped him if he asked her and he knew he could trust her because she was the best mum he knew. But he hadn't been honest with her in a long time about it, so maybe now was the time. He had to stop lying to her even if was not the best moment to do it. It was never going to be a good time, he had to stop looking for excuses and accept that she probably was going to be angry and hurt with him. He hated hurting her, but there's nothing he could really do now to change it. - The thing is after everything that happened last year i felt culty, so i keep looking for her. And when i found her i thought hiding her was the best to protect everyone. I didn't like hiding her, but i really thought it was the best. - He explained.

- Culty? Why? - She asked. Of course she was going to catch that, he said that because he knew she was that perceptive.

- The reason why they let us go to the Upside Down to look for Will, it was because i gave them Eleven's location. - He admitted. He felt the pressure leaving his body. That was what had him worried all the time, worried that Joyce and Eleven will never forgive him for that.

- What?! - She couldn't believe what she just heard. - You change Will for Eleven?! Why did you do that?! I would had never agree to that! - She felt stupid and angry. She thought that he trusted her, but it seems that he didn't, he had been lying all this time. She thought that he trusted her because when everyone thought that she was crazy, he believed her. She thought that he trusted her because that's what friends did, and they were friends, right? And she was not sure why, but she felt her heart breaking.

- I know you would never had agree to that, that's why i didn't tell you. We didn't had time, if we didn't got Will when we did he would have died. I had to protect who i know it was in more danger, and Eleven... I knew she was powerful enough to take care of herself. - That was his truth. He could see her crying, although she was avoiding looking at him, she just stayed with her eyes focused on the floor. He hated seeing her cry and more when he knew it was his fault. He wanted to hug her so bad, but he knew it would be wrong. He needed to give her time. She was right to be angry with him. So he just passed her the cigarette again and they stay smoking in silence. He didn't know what to expect, but that was definitely the first time in a very long time that the silence they shared felt wrong. Kinda made him remember to high school, when he started dating Chrissy just because he was going to Vietnam and he thought the best way to pushed Joyce away and not hurting her was dating other girl. Even if the only kiss they have shared was enough to let him know that he loved her. Why did he always had to make so many stupid decisions?

- I understand your intentions, but i don't agree with your methods. I think we could have find a better way together in both situations. But what's done is done. And i might be angry, but i can see you've been doing a good job with El. She looks good - She gave him her opinion as she finished the cigarette. She dried her tears with the back of her hand before confronting him again, because she was angry and she didn't want to cry in front of him. - Does she knows? - She hoped

Eleven knew everything, because she had seen how they had hug each other. The girl looked so comfortable in Hopper's arms, she looked at him like he was a safe place, like he could protect her of everything even when she didn't want it. And Hopper looked at her with so much emotion and love, he looked at her the way she looks at her sons.

- No. - He answered feeling ashamed. That was another of his worst fears. What if El finds out and never forgive him? What if she scapes again and doesn't want to see him ever again?

- You should tell her, she should listen it from you. - She advised him. She could feel his sadness and insecurities running high, so she grabbed his hand to let him know that they were okay (and will be okay) no matter how angry she was. He made some big mistakes, but he was human. He was apologizing now and saying the true. She might have choose different than he did because she didn't like the way he did it, but he saved Will and he kept Eleven safe. That had to count for something, right? - I'm going to bed, you can stay in the couch if you want. - She said.

- Okay. - He didn't know what to expect, but he was glad she was letting him stay. He didn't know how to make her feel better about everything he had told her, so he let her go.

- You know you didn't have to give them the exact address where El was, right? You could have give them another one. And if they blamed you for not finding her there you could told them it was not your fault she had left the place where you last saw her, you couldn't control her from distance. - She said in a very sad voice. Then she was gone, she left him outside with his mind.

She went to check on Will. Once she saw he was sleeping peacefully surrounded with his friends and free of nightmares, she went to check on Jonathan. She would have like to sleep with his son, after everything that happened having him by her side was probably the only thing that would help her sleep. But she had to let him be, he was okay and was with his friends. She needed to learn to control her anxiety and not panic everytime one of her sons weren't near her. She knew she had good reasons to panic and they couldn't blame her for it, but she was always trying to do her best for them. And this was

doing her best in that moment, letting Will sleep out of her side, even if it wasn't the best for her sleep. She took a deep breath and went to Jonathan's room, he and Nancy were sleeping in his bed, and Steve was sleeping on the floor. She took the ice from Steve's hand and put it on the night table. She turned off the lamp and closed the door so they could sleep better. She went to her room ready to sleep on the floor, but Eleven called her insisting that she should sleep with her and Max in the bed.

- I missed you. - Eleven said happy that Joyce lied down next to her.

- I missed you too and i'm very happy to see you again and that you are okay. - Joyce hug her showing her all her love. They may not knew each other very well, but Joyce had love her since the first moment that she had met her. And it was not just gratitude because Eleven helped her twice to save his younger son, it was because she could recognize herself in some part of the little girl. She didn't know how to explain it, but she was starting to accept that maybe there were lot of things in her life that didn't make sense and this was one of those. At least this one was a good one, love was always good. And this girl needed love, she deserved to know and feel it. And she could do that for her, she already did, she loved her. - Good night. - She kissed the head of El.

- Night. - Eleven murmured hanging to her with lot of strength, making sure Joyce wasn't going to leave the bed to go to sleep on the floor like she first have tried to.

Eleven fell asleep almost an instant later. Joyce didn't think she could sleep that night after everything, but she stayed in bed hugging El.

Jim stayed a long time outside thinking. Joyce was right, he should had give them another address. How could she come out with that idea in less than some few minutes? He didn't have any idea how she did that, but she was always surprising him. Maybe it was her mother instincts? No, he shaked that idea out of him. Joyce sayed mother's instincts didn't exist, that it was just an invent from macho men. Joyce was right, he should had never made a deal with Brenner because he was a monster. But although he was regretting that decision, he could never regret saving Will. He thought about Eleven as well, he imagined thousand of different ways she would react if

she found out about it, and they were all bad. He needed to stop his mind, he had enough for one night. He went into the Byers home and lie down on the couch covering himself with a blanket that Joyce left for him.

The next weeks were hard. Joyce avoid him. He understood why and didn't push her, so the distance between them hurt. It hurt so much that sometimes he felt he was going to suffocate. What also hurt was knowing that she was grieving Bob's death and he couldn't be there for her. He just hoped she knew she could call him for wherever she needed, he would always be there for her. He gave her time and space, he showed her that he respected her decision. But when Eleven asked him to go to the snowball and he knew he couldn't say no, he knew he needed Joyce's help. Thank god Joyce agreed to help him and bought a dress like Eleven wanted.

After he left El in the snowball, he went looking for Joyce knowing she probably would be waiting around. He found her outside the school, leaning on her car. When she agreed on smoking together and she let him comforted her, he knew things between them were alright, that somehow she had forgive him. And as he kissed her head he promised himself that he would not lie to her again because he couldn't lose her.

2. Call me Joyce

Joyce left her job half hour late. That happened a lot since she worked at the market of The Starcourt Mall. Donald couldn't compete against it and had to close his store. Joyce had been really worried, but two weeks later she got the new job. She worked as responsible of the cashiers, nine hours for day from monday to saturday. It was stressful sometimes to had to lead the younger cashiers that only stayed in the job for a few months and to had just one free day to spend with her sons, but they paid her well. At least she didn't had to work in two places anymore, with working at the Mall was enough.

Steve was waiting for her by her car, he worked in the Mall too at the ice cream shop Ahoy. He waited for her sometimes when he needed a ride. She left him in some restaurant, apparently he had a date which she teased him about, then she went home.

That night The Party were hanging in her house, and had been all day since it was rainy. She liked them being at her place, she was glad they still feel safe in her house after every horror that had happened there. The summer school vacations had made her home became in one of the places the kid always hang out, the others were Hopper's cabin and the Wheeler's house. Also they loved going to the wood and the swimming public pool. All Hawkins knew Eleven as Jane, the kid Jim had adopted. The lab was gone after the scandal of the newspaper article, thanks to Nancy, Jonathan and Bauman; but still they had to be careful and keep low profile. So the kids always had to tell them where they were going and called one of them (she or Hopper) if they thought they were in some kinda of trouble.

- Can i come in? - She asked after knocking the door of Will's room. She could her all the noise they were making inside and that made her smile, she love all those kids, they were such good friends to Will and that made her feel happy and grateful. - Hey kids. - She greeted them once Will had open the door to let her in. They were all sitting on the floor playing some board game.

- Hey mum. - Will gave her a kiss on the cheek.

- Hello Ms Byers. - All the kids said at the same time making her

laugh because they sounded like a chorus.

- Having fun? - She asked them.
- Yes, sorry for the mess we're in the middle of a battle. - Will explained.
- Is okay. - She said with a smile, she loved their imagination for games. - Are you guys staying for dinner? - She wanted to know so she could go to cook something.
- Can they? - Will asked excited.
- Of course. - She answered without doubting it for a second.
- Okay, then... - Will looked at his friends and they were all nodding.
- They are staying. - He said with a big smile that made his eyes shine brighter.
- Good, i'm going to cook something, i'll call you when it's ready. - She informed them and went to left the room.
- Thanks Ms Byers. - Lucas said before she was out.
- Actually, can i ask for a favor? - She asked turning back to the kids.
- Yes. - Will answered, all his attention focused in her mother.
- Not you sweetie, to your friends. - She said.
- Yes. - Mike said, and they all nod.
- Can you guys stop calling me Ms Byers and just call me Joyce please? - She was tired of being called Ms Byers. She didn't want to change her last name because it was easy for her sons that they all had the same one, but now that the kids were around a lot she hated being remembered all the time that she had been once married to Lonnie. It just felt wrong.
- Sure, we can do that. - Max agreed talking for everyone.
- But I already call you Joyce. - Eleven said a little confused.

- I know, that is one of the many reason i love you. - She said winking at her and making her laugh.
- But my parents says it's disrespectful to call adults by their names. - Lucas was conflicted with the idea.
- I'm giving you my permission, you can still call me Ms Byers in front of them if you want. - She insisted.
- Okay. - Lucas accepted.

She left them playing and went to the kitchen to started dinner. She loved having all them in her home, but she had to admitted it was not very good for her economy, kids ate a lot. She had to think about something cheap and easy. She found a packet of spaghetti, good that should work. She turned on the radio and started cooking.

- Hey mom. - Jonathan greeted her.
- Ohh, hello darling, hello Nancy, i didn't hear you guys coming in. - She received them.
- Hello Joyce. - Nancy said.
- You want to stay for dinner? - She offered to Nancy.
- Are all the kids staying again? - Jonathan asked before Nancy could answer her mom.
- Yes. - She answered.
- Mom... - Jonathan started protesting.
- Is okay, i love them having them here. - She interrupted him.
- I know, but you can't feed them all the time, don't pressure yourself like that. - Jonathan insisted, trying to take care of her like he always did.
- So, staying for dinner? - She asked Nancy again.
- That would be nice, but we're actually going to the cinema. - Nancy

answered.

- Yes, we just come here because i wanted to grab my jacket. - Jonathan said. - Is it okay? - He asked because if she needed help with the kids he was disposed to stay.

- Of course is okay, go and have fun. - She said with a big smile, she loved seeing young love. - Just be back before 12 please so we can take the kids to their homes? I don't like them going around by bike that late. - She asked him.

- Okay, i'll be here, don't worry. - He agreed.

Nancy and Jonathan left and she couldn't help but feel happy for them. She loved seeing Jonathan so happy. Nancy was good for him, she made him be more relaxed and acted more like someone of his age. She could see they both care a lot for each other and that was cute, and nice. She always felt guilty because Jonathan had to grow up too fast. She knew he worried too much about her and about their money, and always felt that he had the responsibility to take care of her and Will. She wished that she could had protected him from lot of the shit they had been through and that he didn't had to work since high school like she did. But no matter how she had wanted that, it didn't work. She really tried to always did her best, but sometimes her best was just not good enough. So Jonathan going to dates was good, that was what boys of his age did. Jonathan being happy with Nancy was good, because his happiness made her happy.

She had dinner with their kids. She enjoyed and had fun with them, watching their interaction was always something incredible to her because together they were all energetic. She listened to their talks and laughed at their jokes. Once dinner was over they went to watch a movie and she started to wash the dishes until Hopper entered the kitchen feeling frustrated about El wanting to stay until the movie ended. She offered him some of the dinner leftovers and he accepted them finally relaxing, and she joked about him being grumpy when he was hungry. It was actually really nice seeing his relationship progress with El, being a dad looked good on him she thought with a smile as she remembered how he had asked her opinion about him adopting her.

- So, how is work going? - He asked bringing her back to the present.
- It's good. - She answered quickly.
- Right. - He said in an ironical tone. - You expect me to believe that?
- He asked. He insisted because lately she had been acting awkward everytime she talked about her job, and he was worried that there was something wrong going on.
- It's nothing, it's just... - She trailed off thinking about the best way to explain it. But there wasn't really a good way to say it. She took a deep breath, this was going to be hard because once she'll put it into words it was going to be real. - It's stupid, you are gonna think that i'm crazy. - She protested.
- Did i ever make you feel like you were crazy? - He asked starting to get worried. He had never treated her like a crazy person. So for her to say something like that it had to be bad.
- No, never. - She assured him. - It's just that i've been seeing these people, they are around the mall a lot. They acted like they're exchanging important information and they always hang out in the basement, what it's strange because there is nothing but trash there. - She explained.
- Well, that's strange. - He said thinking about everything she just had said. He lighted a cigarette because if he was going to keep listening more suspicious things he needed something to help him relax.
- Sometimes they wear black suits and sometimes they wear just random normal clothes, i might have seen some guns once. - She continued her story. - They think people are too busy working and don't realise about that stuff, and people who visit the mall are too distracted having fun. But i see them, i always see them. - She ended her tale and accepted the cigarette.
- You always had been a good observant, but fuck this is bad. - He said looking at her with an intensity she couldn't quite understand.
- You think it may be related to the lab? - She asked, voicing her worst fear.

- I don't know. Maybe it's just bad business like drugs or weapons traffic. - He suggested thinking different options. - Did you ever see the mayor with them? - He asked.

- Yes, actually i did sometimes. - She answered after taking a moment to think about it. - You think he's behind this? - She asked.

- I don't know, but yesterday i saw him around town with some mans in black. I will investigate. - He answered.

- We. - She said.

- No, i'm the chief of police, i'm the one who investigates here. - He argued.

- But they hang out where i work, i see them all the time. I can investigate too, it's what i have been doing. - She protested, she didn't want to be left on a side about this. She needed to know what was going on so she could keep her sons safe.

- Fine, but you have to promise me you are going to be careful, we don't know how dangerous are these people. - He knew how determined she was when she put her mind on something. He couldn't stop her, after all it was her work place and he couldn't control what she did or not did there.

- I didn't know you care that much. - She said feeling surprised about how scared he looked about the idea of her being in danger.

- I do, i've always did and still do, so please be careful. - He begged trying not to sound that desperate.

- I will. - She promised. - Should we tell something to the kids? - She asked changing the topic because she didn't know how to react to his concern about her.

- No until we know a little more of what we're dealing with. - He answered.

- Okay. - She agreed.

They kept talking about everything and nothing until the kids

finished the movie. Jonathan and Hopper took the kids to their homes, insisting that she deserved to rest. So she hugged the kids goodbye, and promised Eleven that they will see each other again in their weekly dinner. It had become a nice costume, the Hoppers and the Byers always shared a dinner every thursday and a lunch every sunday. No one knew how they started having those costumes, but Joyce loved them. She loved how Hopper and Eleven had connected with them, how their little family fit so well with her little family.

- Since when they call you Joyce? - Hopper asked amused as the kids called her by her name as saying their goodbyes.
- Well it's my name. - She tried not making a big deal about it, because it wasn't. - Since i've asked them. - She answered giving up because it was annoying that he could tell when she was avoiding something.
- Maybe you can convince them to call me Jim? - He suggested.
- No, i like Hop better. - She joked and smiled as she heard him laugh.

Once in bed she thought about everything that she talked with Hopper, about those suspicious men doing strange things and what it could mean. She felt that things were about to change again, and she didn't know if that was good or bad. She was scared, but she was not going to let it paralyze her, she was ready to confront wherever life throw at her. And even more knowing she was not facing it alone, Hopper was with her.

3. On grieving, forgiveness and moving out

Jim was late for the sunday lunch. He hated being late, he was not supposed to work that sunday but Flo called him and ask him to go to deal with some teens that had broken into a store looking for alcohol. He felt glad when finally he was free to go to the Byers home. Sundays and thursdays were his favorite days of the week. and he knew that was related to how well he and El fit with the Byers. They were always welcomed and treated with kindness. They had such a beautiful dynamic that he find himself thinking about them like a family.

- Sorry i'm late, i brought ice cream. - He told the kids as he entered the kitchen to put the ice cream in the freezer. Joyce and he have that costume, whoever who was late had to bring dessert. - Where's Joyce? - He asked. Jonathan was cooking something and Eleven and Will were sitting very quietly on the table.

- I don't know. She went for a walk and hadn't come back yet. - Jonathan answered.

- She was sad. - Eleven said feeling worried.

- I think she miss Bob, she kept looking to the draw i made of him. - Will explained pointing out the draw of hero Bob that was on the fridge.

- Eight months. - He realized as he remembered the date.

- What? - Asked Jonathan confused.

- Is been eight months since Bob died. - He answered. - Okay, i think i know where she is, i'm going to look for her and we'll be back so we can have lunch. - He informed his decision.

Jim took his van and drove to the cemetery. Just like he thought he found her at Bob's grave. He remembered how she used to this when they were teens, she would went to the cemetery in lots of special dates to visit her mother, specially on her birthday (He never did that with Sara. Maybe he should someday?). Now she was doing the same

with Bob. Maybe that was her way of grieving. She was sitting in the grass and she looked lost in her head. She looked so little there that he wanted to protect her from all the bads in the world. He didn't know if interrupting her was a good idea, but he didn't want to leave her alone with her thoughts because he knew from his experience how dangerous that could be.

- Hey. - He said approaching her.
- Hi. - She said surprised that she wasn't alone anymore.
- You're late for lunch. - He told her as he sits next to her.
- I'm sorry, i guess i kinda lost notion of the time. - She apologized and light a cigarette. - Why are you here? - She asked.
- The kids were worried. - He answered accepting the cigarette. Sharing cigarettes was definitely their thing and he loved it.
- I mean, how did you know i was here? - She asked what really was making her wonder.
- It's eight months since Bob... - He told her as he passed her the cigarette. - You used to do this with your mum too, it made sense. - He explained.
- I still visit her on her birthday. - She said returning her sight to the grass and blushing because she felt stupid about doing that.
- It's okay. - He assured her. - You're grieving, is okay if you miss him and wanted to visited him somehow. - He tried to reason with her so she didn't have to feel embarrassed, at least not with him in anyway.
- I never visited Sara. - He confessed feeling sad.
- They stayed in silence for a while and he's glad. He was grateful that she didn't ask about Sara, that she understood that this was not him trying to talk about her daughter. He didn't think he could talk about her yet anyway, it still hurt too much. So he was grateful that she would only take of him what he could give, that she wouldn't pressure him even if maybe it would had helped her to took away her mind from Bob.

- I'm not grieving. - She broke the silence once the cigarette was over.
- Okay. - He said even if he didn't quite believe her.
- Is the quilt. - She finally admitted.
- You feel guilty about Bob's death? - He asked surprised. Because he wasn't expecting her to blame herself, although he may have been expecting that she blamed him at some point. He was the chief of police and he couldn't save him.
- He was there because he loved me. - She said, her voice breaking a little as she started crying silent tears.
- It wasn't your fault, he chose to be brave and saved all of us, he knew the risk. - He made her remember. - The demodogs killed him, not you. If someone is to blame here it should be the lab and the government. - He insisted, he needed her to know that.
- But I didn't love him back... I mean I loved him, but I wasn't in love with him. - She said very quietly, like she was afraid of her own words. - If I would have been honest to him about it maybe he wouldn't have had to deal with my problems and monsters from other dimensions. - She explained what had been troubling her.

He found himself in shock. He had never expected that. Joyce hadn't been in love with Bob? How he didn't have realized that? Maybe he really did disappear for a while when he was hiding Eleven.

- That's why Jonathan didn't like him. I mean it was stupid that he didn't because Bob was a good man, but he didn't like him because he could tell that I wasn't in love with him. And he wants me to be with someone I love, so... - She rumbled. - You must be thinking I'm a terrible person. - She hid her face with her hands feeling horrible.
- No, of course not. - He said as fast as he could. - You're actually one of the best people I know. - And he was really being honest.
- He could have been safe in Maine. I didn't want to move out with him, so he stayed. But if I would have told him I wasn't in love with him maybe he would be safe in Maine. - She said crying harder.

He took her hands out of her face, dry a couple of her tears with his big hands and then he just hugged her. That was the best he had to offer, a warm and safe hug. He held her as she cried all she needed to do. He was surprised to found out that Bob had offered her to move out to Maine, but he was glad she didn't. He couldn't imagine his life in Hawkins without her. Once she was calmed she stayed in his arms feeling too comfortable to move, so he caressed her back and played with her hair to give her some more time.

- I'm sorry. - She apologized when she let herself be able to talk again.

- Don't be, you don't have or need to. - He assured her. - Or maybe you do, but with yourself. You need to forgive yourself so you can't stop blaming yourself for things you didn't have control. - He gave her the only advice he thought it could help.

- Did you forgive yourself for Sara? - She asked with curiosity.

- I don't know, sometimes i think these days is more a yes than a no. - He honestly answered.

- Come on, i think is time for lunch. - She said grabbing to his body to help herself to stand up.

They drove in silence and when they got to her home it was all noise and laughs again. The kids had that kind of magic on her, that he couldn't stop admiring. She would do anything for the kids, even turned off her trouble mind for a while and let herself be okay in the moment to not worried them. She was so strong, but he didn't think she realised that. She was so confusing, like she could be fire and rain at the same time. But no matter what, she always kept going. Her determination to kept going no matter what life throw at her made her look like some kind of warrior in his eyes. He wish he could be as resilient as her.

Jim and Eleven stayed all the afternoon, and only left when it was starting to get dark and Jim insisted that it was time for them to go. Eleven stayed silent as he drove, but he could tell that the girl was into something. She kept looking at him with a rare wonder, almost as she was trying to read him, like she knew something that he didn't.

But he had learned that she would talk when she was ready, so he gave her time.

He actually learned that from Joyce, from watching how she interacted with kids. She always was patient with her sons and the other kids, always let them have their time to figure out their feelings and thoughts. Always listened to them and explained things considering them as real persons. And most of the time it worked, they would share their worries once they could find a way to express them. The people in Hawking only saw her as a symbol of anxiety, but he could see through that. After everything she had been through it was normal that she felt anxious sometimes. But what he admired was that she didn't let that define her, she pushed back. And when it was about her sons and the other kids she was always patient, no matter how anxious she was feeling. He didn't know how she learned to control her feelings like that, but it was kinda impressive.

- Do you love Joyce? - Eleven asked.

- Of course I do, she's my friend. - He answered. He knew that was not what she meant, but he was so surprised with the question that he tried to avoid it.

- I meant more than friends. - She clarified. - Do you love her like I love Mike and Jonathan loves Nancy? - She tried, asking with a different approach.

- Joyce and I, we are friends. We love each other as friends. - He answered.

- I think there's more. - She said with confidence.

- Why? - He needed to know because he was starting to feel irritated. They were just friends and he needed Eleven to understand that.

- I have eyes, I can see the way you two look and care for each other.
- Eleven explained.

- Because we are friends. - He insisted.

- Okay. - She accepted, but he could tell that she quite didn't believe him.

He wasn't in love with Joyce, right? He loved and care for her because she was her friends and because she was probably her favorite person in all the little stupid town they lived in. He had been jealous about Bob, he admitted that to himself. But because he was scared to lose her, like that she being with someone romantically would meant they couldn't friends anymore. But it wasn't like that. She had still been present, shared her worries of the Upside Down with him and relied on him. He shouldn't had been jealous when he was the one who disappeared, not her. And now... Now their friendship felt stronger, all the time they were spending together felt special and made him felt she was closer to him than any other person. They understood each other, they shared traumas, and they were the first person they would ask for help when they needed it. And they shared memories of childhood and teens years. That was it, that was all.

Two weeks later it was time to move out for the Hoppers. Jim had finally found a house he liked and could paid. He wanted to give a home to Eleven, and he thought it would be better for her to live near the town instead of the middle of the wood. Eleven was happy since the moment he told her his idea, and that made him felt like he was doing a good choice. Joyce, Jonathan, Nancy, Steve, and the party helped them move out all their staffs It was a little chaotic with so many people around trying to help but they made it work.

He had to leave at some point in the afternoon because they called him from the station. When he came back to his new home everyone had left, except the Byers. He found them in Eleven's room, painting the walls with colorful drawings. Joyce was trying to make them sing a punk song with her, but they were just listening and laughing. He enjoyed watching them, that was a perfect moment he wanted to remember.

- Hi, you're back! - Eleven came running to him for a hug when she realised of his presence.
- Yes, i'm back and i brought dinner. - He said hugging her with a smile.
- Do you like how my room looks? - Asked eleven.

- Is very colorful. - He answered looking the walls.
- That was my idea. - Will informed blushing a little because he felt embarrassed.
- Because colors makes you feel happy and not sad. - Eleven explained.
- It's nice. - He assured the kids.
- Want to help us finish? - Joyce asked offering him a brush.
- With painting or singing? - He teased her.
- Come on, i know you like sex pistols too. - Joyce said with a small smile.
- Oh, not you too please. - Jonathan complained and Joyce laugh at that.

He laughed too because her laugh was really contagious. He liked seeing her this relax and happy. Before he could realise what was happening she painted his nose with the brush he hadn't take from her. All the kids laughed and that was when he knew there had to be consequences. He grabbed one of the paint cans and started chasing Joyce with it around the room. And that was how the painting war started. It was really fun and they laughed a lot. He couldn't remember when was the last time he felt that young and alive.

After they had cleaned and finished the room, they went to the dining room to eat the dinner he had bought. And that was the moment he realised Eleven was right. There, as he looked at Joyce eating a cold pizza with her clothes stained with painting and a sincere shining smile on her face; he realised he was in love with her. Was he in love with her again or did he never stopped loving her? He was confused at that, but it didn't matter. He loved her and he should be panicking at that realization. And then she laughed again with the kids as they kept making jokes, and his heart jumped in his chest with so much strength that scared him for an instant, making him think that the others will heard. Fuck, he was really screwed.

4. All the time in the world

Joyce left work for lunch time. She didn't had time to bring food with her that morning, nor money to buy something, so she went back home. She had an hour so she had to be quick.

In the drive home she thought about Hopper. They were getting closer and she liked that. She felt like something was growing between them, she could feel it sometimes in the way he looked at her. They always had a connection for the past they shared, and it kinda returned after he helped her save Will. She had thought that maybe he didn't want that connection back when he disappeared, but now she knew he did it because he was hiding Eleven. And lately there was something more, something like feelings. Somehow she knew that she always gonna love him in some way, and that was too much to process.

When she got home she find something unusual, Jonathan was reunited with Nancy, Steve and a blonde girl. She was probably a Steve's coworker because she was wearing the same type of clothes.

- Hey mom. - Jonathan greeted her. - What are you doing here? - He asked looking a little nervous.
- I came for lunch. - She answered. - What are you guys doing? - She asked,noting that his older son looked like he didn't want her there.
- We were... - Steve started talking but Jonathan interrupted him.
- We were doing the university applications. - Jonathan said.
- But they are coming next week. - She said out loud, realizing that what his son said didn't make sense.

University applications? Lie, that was a lie and she knew it. Why was his son lying to her? She could feel that something was wrong. She looked at the papers around the room, she was sure the answer was there. They were up to something and she needed to know what was it before it becomes something bad they couldn't handle. It was almost like she had a feeling, a feeling that reminded her that they

had to be alert because they were never going to be totally safe again.

- Mom. - Jonathan called her like he was insisting her to let it go.
- Jonathan, what's wrong? - She asked. She had sense that something was wrong since the beginning, but now that she knew she was right she needed to know what was going on.
- It could be nothing, i don't want to worry you. - He tried to avoid telling her.
- Please. - She insisted.
- Okay. - He accepted.- Robin tell her. - He said to the blonde girl.
- Are you sure is okay to me to tell her? - Robin asked.
- Yes, she knows everything about the upside down and the lab. - He answered.
- So, she won't think i am crazy? - Robin asked still looking unsure.
- I won't. - Joyce answered without even doubting it for a second.
- Yesterday i saw something at the mall, something that is not normal. - Robin said looking unsure in how much was okay to reveal.
- Did you saw some men wearing black or maybe some men with guns? - Joyce asked letting her know that she had been seeing some unusual staff too.
- How do you know? - Asked Steve surprised.
- Just because i'm an adult woman doesn't mean i'm stupid or i don't see things that happens around me. - She defended herself. - I know there is something going on at the mall basement. - She let them know her suspicions.
- Okay, i guess we have a confirmation now. - Nancy said looking ar Joyce like she was proud of her.

- It was late, i forgot the keys of my house, so i came back to the mall to look for them. I saw a group of men carrying a man. - Robin continued her story. - But this man, he was different. He looked dirty and like he was sick, his clothes were ripped, his eyes were red, and he was really strong. Four man had to grabbed him so they could take him. And i don't know where they took him or if they did something to him. - She explained the best she could.

- Shit. - She exclaimed once she catched up. - And you guys think is related with the lab or the upside down, that's why you are investigating? - She asked pointing out all the papers in the table.

- Yes. - Jonathan answered.

- We called Bauman and he thinks the same. - Nancy added.

As she assimilated everything she thought about Hopper. She needed to tell him what was going on. They were a team now and they had been investigating since she had shared her worries about the mall with him. She liked sharing this things with him because he always supported her and made her feel safe. He not only he could help because he was the chief of police, he wanted to help and that meant more to her that she could ever tell.

- Okay, i'm gonna call Hopper. - She decided.

- I don't know if that's a good idea. - Steve said.

- Who's Hopper? - Robin asked.

- Mom don't call him. - Jonathan protested.

- I'm sorry but i have to. - She apologized. - We need to be careful, and the right thing to do is tell him. Besides he knows that there is something going on at the mall because i already told him about what i've been seeing. - She explained trying to stay calmed.

She didn't have lunch that day. Her time was over before she had time to process everything. They, the teens and she, reunited with Hopper once everyone were out of work. They told everything to Hopper and that made her feel a little better, like him knowing would helped them to be safer. Hopper didn't know if it was a good

idea to involucrate Bauman, he didn't trust him and she could understand that. She didn't know him, so she didn't know if she could trust him either. But Nancy and Jonathan were sure they could trust him. So maybe they should started by trusting them.

The next day, once again, she didn't have lunch. But this time was because Hopper called her asking for help. He had a fight with Eleven the night before. He didn't want to disturbed her for breakfast, but when he looked for her in her room so they could have lunch she wasn't there. He didn't know where she was and he was afraid she had escaped again. She took the next of her day for free to help him look for Eleven, even if that meant she had to do a double turn the next day. So, she missed lunch again, because looking for Eleven was more important.

- What was the fight about? - She tried asking again. He was not in a good mood to talk, he hadn't want to give her much information since she had been helping him to looked for his daughter. She didn't know what had happened but she could feel how worried he was, and that made her worried too.

- I don't want to talk about it. - He said, letting out a frustrated sound.

- Hey, we're going to find her. - She assured him.

- How do you know that? What if she escaped again? - He asked, almost pannikin. Eleven had escaped when she found out that he gave Brennan her location in change of going to Upside Down to save Will. He should had told her before she could find about it, like Joyce had advised him. But he didn't, and when Eleven found out she felt betrayed and hurt. So she had escaped. She was out of town for a week, she had stayed with Kali. But she came back when the anger was over and was ready to listened him tell her the whole story.

- I just feel like this time is different, your relationship had grown. - She explained. - And if she escaped she will come back again, she always come back because deep down she knows she's safe and loved with you. - She held his hand and give him a firm squeeze to remind him she was there to support him.

They, the party and the teens kept looking for Eleven until it becomes dark. When the night fall Joyce went back to her house to looked for some flashlights and some food, they were going to need that if they were going to keep the search. But once she was at her home, she didn't even had made more than two steps inside when someone crushed into her. It was Eleven. She felt like she could breathe again knowing the girl was safe and okay. She held the girl with strength because she needed to know it was real. She held her until Eleven stopped crying.

Joyce helped Eleven to calmed down, then guided to her room and made her rest in her bed. She made hot chocolate and called Hopper to let her know Eleven was okay, and she was with her in her home.

- Here you have. - She gave her the hot chocolate.
- Thanks. - She said picking the cup.
- I called Hopper and let him know you were here so he can stop worrying a little. - She let the little girl know.
- I understand. - She accepted, knowing that what Joyce did what's probably for the best.
- Do you want to talk about what happened? - She asked, giving her the option to choose if she wanted or not to talk.
- He didn't told you? - She asked with suspicion.
- No. - She answered. - You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, is okay. - She reassured feeling like the other was about to break.
- I just... - She stopped to think the best way to say what she wanted to say. - I don't want to lose you. - She finally said and started crying.
- Hey you are not going to lose me, i'm here. - She said hugging Eleven to comfort her.
- A woman came to see him, she was naked. And I don't want to have another mother, not if it's not you. - She confessed.
- Aaww darling. Your dad and I, we're not together, he's free to be

with whoever woman he wants. - She said understanding were the other was coming from. - But our relationship don't need to be defined by that, it should be defined by us, don't you think? - She said playing with the girl's hair, knowing that it always helped her relax.

- What do you mean? - She asked.

- That i love you like a daughter, and i'm always going to love you no matter who your dad dates. - She explained it the most simple way she could find.

- So is okay if i love you like a mother although i already have one? - She asked with a mix of scare and illusion.

- Love is always okay. I'm not going to take you away from your mother, she's always going to be your mother. But i'm here for you because i want to be part of your life, i love you. - She assured her expressing all her love.

- I love you too. - She said, finally letting herself smile. - Do you love my dad like he loves you? - She asked.

- Yes, we love each other, we're friends. - She answered with a little smile.

- I think you love each other more than friends. - She said.

- It's complicated. - She tried without knowing what to say.

- He said the same. - She said shaking her head. - Love is not complicated, adults are complicated. - She conclude.

She stayed with Eleven until the girl fall asleep. She let the girl sleeping in her room and went outside, sensing that Hopper was going to be there. And she was right, he was there, smoking at her front door. She joined him and he shared his cigarette with her. They stayed smoking in silence for a while, enjoying each other company.

- Did she told you about the fight? - He asked breaking the silence.

- Yes. - She answered.

- Is not what she thinks, is not what you think. - He said feeling frustrated. - That woman, i didn't invited her and i'm not dating her or having anything with her; she just show up to surprise me, thought it was a good idea because we went out once like two years ago. I mean, who does that? I stopped her and made sure that she won't do anything like that again - He explained and express what had him so irritated.

- You know you don't have to explain me, right? You're single and you are free to do wherever you want with your sex and love life. - She said to make sure he knew she was not judging him, she never did; and she wasn't exactly angry.

- I know, but i wanted to. - He justified himself.

It had hurt her to know that he was sleeping with other women. She didn't know why now it hurted, when it had always been like that. She didn't understand why she felt that way when Eleven told her everything about the fight. Was she jealous? Was she hurt? Was she disappoint that Hopper and she never could concrete the feelings between them? Maybe it was time for them to stop denying and delaying their connection. There were lot of history and attraction between them. They'd always had each other backs when they were kids and teens, they had a beautiful and strong friendship and one amazing kiss, they'd been separated for Vietnam and life; but somehow they were back at being friends again. No one had ever respect her like him. No one had ever made her feel safe like him. No one had take care of her like him. She never had love someone like she loved him. She had loved him back then, and she loved him now. She still loved him. She didn't know if she was ready to let herself love him and let him love her back (if he loved her). Somehow it seems like their love was always out of time.

- She thinks of me like a mother, and i tell her that's okay because i love her like a daughter, our relationship won't change no matter who you date. I hope that's okay. - She let him know, changing the topic.

- Is okay, i know she thinks of you like that. I mean, she didn't tell me, but the way she talks about you and look at you, i know. - He said with a smile, he loved watching El and Joyce relationship grow.

And he was happy that El chose someone as good as Joyce for a mother role.

- She thinks we love each other. - She said finally needing to let that out.

- Joyce, she, i... She is a kid, she doesn't know what she's talking about. - He tried to find an excuse. He was nervous, he didn't want to mess up the things between them.

- I thinks she's right. - She admitted surprising him.

- What? - He asked confused.

- I love you. - She confessed.

She could see the exact moment he understood what she was saying. He looked full of happiness. She could read all the emotions in his eyes and all over his face, and she felt glad that she was not alone on her feelings. He loved her back, and suddenly she felt scared.

- Joyce, i... - He started talking emotionally.

- Don't, please don't say it. - She interrupted him. - I'm not ready for it yet. - She explained.

- Okay. - He accepted letting her lead. - I'll wait. - He said like a promise.

- You don't have to. - She assured him. - I know what it feels, like we are always untimely. Is okay if you find someone else before i'm ready, is okay if you want to date other persons. - She said, that was the right thing even if it killed her a little.

- I don't want to date other persons, i'll wait. - He insisted giving her confidence.

- Okay. - She accepted and felt a small smile form in her lips.

- We have all the time in the world. - He reassured her.

- Unless a monster of another dimension kill us or something. - She

half joked making him laugh.

- We won't let that happen. - He said and he really needed to believe that; if not he was going to crumble and he couldn't do that to El, Joyce, Will, Jonathan (and himself). He had persons to live for now, a family, and he was not going to let anyone take that from him no matter the cost.

They stayed in silence, smoking the last cigarette. Their arms and shoulders glued, like they needed the fisic contact to know everything was alright.

- You can stay in the coach if you want. - She offered when they finished the last cigarette.

- Thank you. - He thanked her a followed her inside her home.

She went to bed and thought about everything they'd just talked before falling asleep. She wanted to be ready, but she knew she still needed time to heal. She hoped to be ready soon, because she loved him and she wanted to give themselves a chance.

5. Follow your dreams

Joyce was making dinner. She was cooking a beef casserole. She had never been very good at cooking, but she had learnt to defend herself on it since she had Jonathan and felt the need to do more home cooked and healthier meals. She found herself thinking in Hopper again, it seems like lately she couldn't stop thinking about him.

- Can i help? - Asked Jonathan interrupting her thoughts.
- No, is okay, i got it. - She answered.
- I can help. - He insisted.
- Then i peel and and you cut - She said pointing the potatoes and the carrots. She gave him something to do because she felt that he needed that.

They stayed in silence working together. She could feel that something had him worried, and that worried her. She wished she could took away all his problems and the pressures of their daily life. He had grown up so fast and that always made her emotional. She gave him time, she knew he would talk when he wanted to and when he was ready, so at least she could give him the comfort of her presence.

- Tomorrow comes the university applications. - He said.
- I know. - She always remembered the important things about her sons.
- I was thinking that I should apply to Indiana University. - He shared what he had been thinking.
- What about NYU? - She asked surprised about what his son was revealing.
- I don't want to go there anymore. - He answered.
- Why? - She asked needing to know what made him change of opinion.

He stayed in silence, he didn't know what to say or how to explain what was going on. And that made her worry even more. NYU had been his dream since he was six year old. So, what had change? Why was he giving up to his dream?

- Do you still want to study photography? - She asked. - Because is okay if you want to study other thing, i will support you in wherever you want to do; you know that right? - She reassured him, making sure that he knew that he could choose his future.

- Yes, i still want to study photography. - He answered.

- So why not NYU? - She asked needing to know more to understand what was going on with him.

- Because Indiana has a good program too and it's cheaper. - He explained.

- I'm not letting you give up to your dreams because of the money, we'll figure out something. - She said with certainty. She needed him to know that his dreams came first no matter what.

- I know we will, that's what your second job was about right? - He said. He always knew that they had money problems, but he also knew that her mother used to work in two places because she wanted to save some money so Will and him could go to the university. Maybe they couldn't afford everything with it, but that and some kinda of scholarship he could get would help.

- You've always been better with numbers than me. - She said surprised that he had realized that without her telling him. - I know it's not much, but it will help, and i'lll keep helping. - She assured him.

- I know, but Indiana is closer to home if something strange happens again. - He finally confessed his worries.

- So, that is what this is about? - She asked and he assisted. - Darling you can't think like that, you can't stop living your life thinking on the "what if". - She said trying to reason with him.

- But, if i'm not here when something bad happens, who's gonna take

care of you and Will? - He asked looking scared and vulnerable.

- Hey, i'm the mom here, let me be the one who take care of you. - She remembered him.

- But you need and deserve someone to take care of yourself too - He protested.

- Maybe, but i'm the adult here. - She said feeling moved about the good heart his older son had. - I knew i haven't been the best mum, that you grew up faster than i would have like and i wished you could have do high school without working. I wanted better for you. I want you to follow your dreams, let me give this to you. - She explained expressing her feelings on this topic.

- Okay - He accepted looking emotional. - And if something strange or bad happens? - He asked still not letting the topic go.

- You still have a year here. - She said not wanting to think a future that still seems far away.

- Mom. - He insisted.

- I'll call you and you can come back, i promise. - She assured him.

- Okay, good, i can agree with that. - He said feeling relieved.

- I love you. - She said caressing his face.

- I love you too mom. - He said, and he finally let the tears he had accumulated in his eyes fall.

She hugged him then. He hugged her back with lot of strength, and he let overthrow himself in her arms. She hold him and caressed his head and his back trying to show him all her love. She really wished she could give him the world, but she couldn't, she had to be realistic. But she could give this to him, she would let him follow her dreams. She wanted him to follow his dreams. She wanted him to be happy.

So, the next day she helped him full the university application to NYU (and others just in case, Indiana inclusive). She was sure he was

going to get a scholarship at NYU, he was smart and had good grades, and he was so talented.

Nancy was with them, but she didn't want to full the applications yet because she said she didn't know what she wanted to study. Joyce felt there was something more there, but she didn't want to push the girl. She offered her help in case she needs it and let her see how Jonathan and her completed all the applications papers.

When they finished the bell rang and Jonathan went to open the door. He came back with a bloody face Steve. Jonathan went to send the university applications. Nancy stayed because she was going to have dinner with them.

- You are not going to ask me what happened? - Steve asked surprised, as he watched Joyce crealing his face with concentration.

- Do you want me to? - She rebuked. - If you want to talk about i'm here to listen, but i'm not going to pressure. Although you should take care of your face more, is like you everytime you are here you are bleeding. - She said as she finished cleaning his face. Then she gave him some ice to put on it.

- Jonathan and Will are lucky to have a mom like you. - He said.

- Me? Crazy, poor and anxious Joyce? - She asked using the words that she new almost everyone in Hawkins used to describe her.

- They wouldn't think you are crazy if they knew everything about the upside down and the lab. - Nancy said, needing to defend her because she never like how the town treated her and her sons.

- Nancy's right. - Steve agreed. - And besides no matter what everyone says, no one can't deny you love your sons. You accept them as they are, you support them in their likes and trust them but still do everything to protect them. - He explained what he had really wanted to mean.

- Well, that's what is love for me. - Joyce said blushing a little because she was not used to people saying so many good things about her.

- You let Jonathan chose his career. - He said.

- Of course i let him, i want him to be happy and being a photographer had been his dream since he's six. - She said smiling as she thought about his son.

- My dad is not like that. - He admitted.

- He was the one who did this to you? - She asked with concern. He couldn't answer, and that's how she knew she was right. - He shouldn't have done it, no one deserves to be mistreated. You didn't deserve this. - She tried to make him understood. She wished she had have an adult someone who said that to her when she was the one being mistreated by her father.

- He wants me to study economic to be a bussman like him, but i want to be an anthropologist. He was so angry when i told him. - He explained.

- I want to be a police woman, but my parents thinks that's not proper for a woman. - Nancy said, feeling ready to talk about it because she realized she was not the only one in that situation.

- Okay, listen, I don't want to come between the relationship you have with your parents, but i have to say this no matter what's proper or not. - She said trying to get their attention to the present moment.

- This is yours future, not theirs. You are the ones who's gonna have to study and work about wherever you chose, not them. Follow your dreams. - She expressed her point of view on the topic.

- I wish things could be that easy. - Steve said.

- Life is not easy, and neither most of the things that are worth it. - She said being honest, at least that what her experience had teached her. - Now how about you two help me make the cake for tomorrow?

- She asked feeling that they needed to end this conversation for now and that it was going to be good for them to have something to do.

Nancy and Steve helped her make the cake for Eleven's birthday. She had never been that good at cooking, but she had learn to defend herself for her sons. Jonathan was better on almost every meal, but in the sweet things she was the winner. They did a chocolate cake with caramel and hazelnuts, they decorated it with cream. They had to put

"Jane" on it because the others parents that were going at the party didn't know the truth.

The next day everyone were reunited at Hopper's house for Eleven's birthday. They stayed in the yard. It was all decorated with colors balloons, pennants and lights. It was kinda messy, but it looked good all together. There was lot of food and people, Hopper had wanted to give a good first birthday celebration to Eleven. The kids had a great time playing with water balloons and helping Eleven ride her new bike.

- Thank you for everything. - Hopper thanked her as she started doing some of the dishing.

- You don't have to, i wanted to help and be present. - She said.

- Jane loved the bike. - He shared with her, because she was the one who gave him they idea for the present.

- I'm glad to hear that. - She said with a smile.

- She also love the walkie talkie and the cake. - He said referring to her presents.

- The walkie talkie was from the kids, not me. - She clarified. - Is nice you did this for her, she deserved to have a normal birthday party. - She expressed appreciating what he did for Eleven.

- Yes, she deserves everything, it's time for her to be a happy and normal kid. - He said showing his affection for the girl.

- Is good that she has you. - She said with a smile.

Before she went home with her sons she took Eleven so they could have a moment alone. She wanted to give Eleven her present. The girl looked surprised to have another present for her, but accept the explanation she gave her about the walkie talkie being from the kids and not her.

- It's pretty. - Eleven said looking at the necklace.

- I'm glad you liked it. My mom gave it to me for my 14th birthday

and told me i should give it to my daughter when i have one. - Joyce said as she remembered one of her last memories she had with her mother.

- But i'm not... - Eleven tried to give her back the necklace.
- I want you to have it. - Joyce insisted.
- Are you sure? - Eleven asked and Joyce noded. - Can you help me put it on? - She said.
- Of course. - Joyce helped her with the necklace.
- How it looks? - Eleven asked.
- Beautiful. You are beautiful and the necklace looks beautiful on you. - Joyce answered with a smile.
- What is it? - Eleven wanted to know, looking at the pendant.
- It's a dragon-fly. My mom used to said that it was a symbol of transformation and a reminder to follow your dreams. - Joyce explained.
- I love it, thank you. - Eleven said hugging her to show her how grateful she was for the present.
- I love you. - Joyce said hugging her back.

In the way back home Joyce saw some dragonflies flying and smiled. Maybe it was to late for her to follow some of her dreams, like have a profession, have a better job, travel around the world, don't have to be counting every cent to know that she could pay all the bills... But there were others dreams she had that she could follow. Maybe Hopper and her were going to have a chance to explore their what she did know was that her kids (and she mentally include Eleven on that) were going to follow their dreams, she was going to make sure of that.

6. Something in the water (part 1)

Will saw it everything, like a vivid dream. As he saw the images in his head he draw them on a paper. A man was hurting his mom. A man he didn't know. When he came back to conscious he realized he had draw the man and what he had wasn't a dream or a nightmare, it had been a vision. What did it mean? Did had powers or was he kinda possessed again? But if he was possessed it didn't make sense that her visions could help him with her mom. He decided that he was going to go to Jonathan first, he didn't want to worry her mom.

- Do you know this man? - He asked to his brother. Jonathan was making breakfast.

No, i don't. - Jonathan answered after watching the draw, then continued making the waffles.

- Well then we have to find him before he hurts mom. - Will said sitting on the table.

- What? - Jonathan asked feeling confused.

- I had a vision, this man is going to hurt mom. - Will explained.

- You had a vision? Since when you have visions? And how do you know it wasn't just a nightmare? - Jonathan questioned.

- I know because i was awake when it happened. - Will answered. - Jonathan you have to believe me, we need to... - He started pleasing, but suddenly they felt noise, their mother was awake.

- You need to save that draw, we don't need to worry mom about more things. - Jonathan indicated. - We'll talk about it once we are back from the public pool, okay? - He suggested because he didn't want to leave his brother concerned.

- Okay. - Will accepted.

Joyce entered the kitchen and gave her sons a good morning kiss. They had breakfast together. It was sunday and she had the day free. They weren't going to have lunch with the Hopper's because Jim had

to work and the kids were going to the public pool. Maybe she should do some research about the lab, she felt like they were stuck and that made her worry. Things were quiet, too quiet. And somehow that made her feel anxious, like she was waiting something to happen, like something was going to explode if she didn't pay attention.

- Mom you should come with us. - Will said interrupting her thoughts.

- What? To the pool? - She asked surprised. - No, i don't want to interfere in your friends time. - She appreciated the offer, but didn't want to bother.

- Will is right, you should come. Is your free day, you could relax, swim, sunbathe or something. - Jonathan agreed with Will's idea. I'm sure Karen will be there too, you could catch up with her. - He tried to convinced her.

And they did, they convinced her. So that how she found herself driving to the public pool with Will, Eleven, Max, Lucas and Dustin. Jonathan was taking Nancy, Mike, Holly and Karen. She was lost in her thoughts again, but this time thinking about Hopper. About how little time they had for themselves lately. She wished he was going to the pool with them. She knew it was probably stupid, but she kinda missed him. Suddenly something in the kids conversations got her attention.

- What you mean he's acting worth? - She asked, voicing what the kids hadn't dare to.

- I don't know how to explain it. - Max said feeling frustrated. - He's like more aggressive, and he always looks sick, he's pale and sweating all the time. - She described.

- Did he went to the doctor or something? Maybe he is really sick. - Will said

- I don't think so, is not like his dad or my mom care anyway. -

- You don't have to worry about him anymore, i can use my powers on him if he's still bothering you. - Eleven said with confident.

- I'm sure Max appreciate you being protective, but i don't think is a good idea. You need to be careful with your powers or Hopper would have a heart attack. - She remind Eleven about not making her powers known to everyone, she tried a funny way to not ruin the mood.

When they got to the public pool she let the kids grabbed their staff from the trunk. But before she let them be, she took Max to a corner so they could talk in peace.

- Hey i just wanted to tell you that if you ever feel like you are not safe at your home, you can come to mine. You can have a sleepover with Will. - She said quietly and slow, needing the girl to knew she was being serious about it.

- Why? - Max asked. She felt confused because she had never expect someone to offered that to her.

- Because everyone deserves to feel safe. And we might no know each other that well yet, but i know you are a good girl and you are good friend to Will and Jane. So you are always welcome with us. - She explained caressing softly some of the hair of the girl and putting it behind her ears. - Okay? - She asked needing to know that the other had understood.

- Okay. - Max agreed with a mix of grateful and embarrassment feelings.

She gave the girl a little kiss in her forehead and then let her go with her friends. She watched them a little from afar and then went to do something for herself. She looked for Karen, but she was hanging out with a group of mom that Joyce knew that didn't like her. She didn't like crowds in Hawkins, because she felt like they were judging her all the time. She didn't know if coming to the pool had been a good idea. She took a deep breath and grabbed a lounge chair and located herself in a quiet spot. She should tried to relax, this was her free day.

She was trying to sunbathe but she couldn't shut her mind. She had bad feeling. She didn't know where it came from, but she felt like something bad was going to happen, like the public pool wasn't a safe

place. She really needed to calm down because she didn't want to have a panic attack in a public place.

- Hey. - She said drawing Jonathan's attention.

- Is everything okay? - He asked feeling worried, he could sense that she was kinda anxious.

- Yes, everything is okay. - She assured him because she didn't want to worry him more than he always did.

- I love your swimsuit, you look beautiful. - Nancy appreciated how she looked in her red one piece.

- Thanks. - She said blushing. The swimsuit was old and she didn't feel very comfortable with her body being exposed, but she was glad with the teen for trying to comforted her. - You look beautiful too. - She said back being sincere, Nancy was a beautiful young woman.

- Thank you, I was actually a little nervous about wearing a two pieces suit for the first time, but I'm okay with it for now. - She said as she looked at her swimsuit and blushed a little.

- By the way, I'm sorry if I'm interrupting, I just wanted to know if you have your walkman. - She said, focusing her attention in her son to let him know the reason why she interrupted them.

- I do, I have it in the car. - He said.

- Can I borrow it? - She asked.

- Of course. - He answered without even doubting a second about it. - Here you have. - He gave her his car keys so she could look for it.

- Thank you darling. - She thanked him with a smile.

She went to her son's car and pick the walkman. Then she went back to her lounge chair and tried to relax one more time. She smiled at the first songs that came to her ears. The clash, her son was really a fanboy of that band. Maybe she should buy him a t-shirt of them for his birthday. The music helped her forget her worries and her bad feelings, and thankfully she found herself being calm.

She must had fall asleep because the next thing she knew was that she was being wake up with shouts. Everyone were freaking out and running. She didn't understand why but she quickly came to action and went running to the kids. And that's when she saw what was happening, there was something in the water of the pool. It was becoming darker every minute and kinda exploding in waves. She ran to the kids, they were getting out of the pool, she helped Will and Max, whose were the lasts ones, or so she thought.

- Is everyone okay? - She asked checking everyone to make sure they were all okay.

- Holly is still there. - Mike said freaking out.

-I'll go for her, you guys stay here. - She said locating with her sight were Holly was.

- I can use my magic. - Eleven suggested.

- No, is not safe for you that people find about your powers, besides we might need them later for something bigger, save your strengths. - She didn't like giving orders to the girl but she needed to protect everyone, or at least tried it, and that was she thought it was the best.

- Okay. - Eleven accepted.

She got into the pool and swam to where Holly was. She kinda hated the water because when she was little she almost drowned once. But she didn't let that fear controlled her. She could felt like the water was sucking everything, so she hurried to reach the little girl. She used all her strengths she had, it was a hard fight but she was going to win. She was not going to gave up because Holly needed her. Holly was losing the fight, but before she could got stuck under the water Joyce got to her and picked her in her arms. She swan with the girl to the nearer border. Jonathan and Nancy were there in an instant and helped both to got out. Nancy grabbed Holly in her arms and hugged her.

- Thank you. - Nancy thanked Joyce feeling really emotional.

- You did great mom. - Jonathan said covering her with his towel.

They went to where to where the kids were waiting for them. People were still running everywhere and the water was getting even more wilder, and she didn't know how that was possible. She put herself between the pool and the kids, like she being on the front could protect everyone for wherever the hell was happening.

- Heather is still there. - Dustin said pointing the only person left in the pool.

- What? - Joyce asked and the moment she found the teen with her sight she felt guilty for not have helped her. - I have to. - She started to say as she took a step in the pool's direction.

- Mom, no. - Jonathan said grabbing her by her arm. - There's no time. - He tried to reason with her. He was scared and she didn't want her mother to put herself in danger again.

And he was right, the time was out. Suddenly there was a big noise that made everyone covered their ears. And when it stopped the water of the pool was gone, and so was Heather. But what made everyone freaked out even more was that in the bottom of the pool there were lots of rats. The rats were disgusting and she almost felt like she was going to throw up if she kept looking at them. She couldn't understand what just happened, but she was sure it had to be related to the Upside Down and the lab. And she felt like the kids were having her same thoughts. She didn't know what to say or what to do, so she took them back to the car to wait for the police. As they waited she put her clothes back on, not caring about wetting them.

The police arrived and Hopper was with them in an instant, making sure all of them were okay. He went to do his job with his coworkers. Jonathan took Nancy, Karen and Holly back to their house. Joyce and the kids stayed waiting for Hopper, or better said she made the kids wait with her because she needed to know wherever they could tell her about this crazy mess they just have been through. When Hopper finally came to her he offered her a coffee that she accepted. She explained him everything the best way she could, trying to gave him every detail in case it could be useful somehow.

- I'm sorry i wasn't here. - He apologized.

- Is not your fault, you were working and you couldn't know that something like this was going to happen. - She assured him.
 - I know, but if it had been a normal Sunday we would have been having lunch together away from all this mess. - He said and he lighted a cigarette to share with her.
 - This is related with the Upside Down, the lab and with what has been going on in the mall; isn't it? - She asked what had her scared.
 - I think so. - He answered honestly.
 - What are we going to do? - She needed him to give her some peace, some hope that he knew how to deal with this.
 - I don't know. - He wished he could offer her something better, but he didn't want to lie. They didn't know exactly with what they were dealing, so
 - What about Heather? - She asked feeling worse and worse with every minute that passed.
 - I don't know, is like she disappeared, there is no trace of her. - He explained. - But I promise you I'll do everything I can to find her. - He gave her his word hoping that was enough to calm her a little.
 - I saw her disappear Hop, I was there and I didn't help her, I couldn't. - She trailed off, her voice breaking because the impotence of not having been able to help crushed her.
 - Hey, this wasn't your fault either. - He said with conviction. - You did everything you could, you helped the kids out of the pool and went into for Holly even though you hate to swim. Don't be so hard with yourself. - He reassured her.
- Of course he remembered she hated the water, he was the one who had saved her when she almost drowned. By the look he gave her she knew he was thinking about that moment too. She leaned into him because she needed to feel safe, she needed his strength. He hugged her and she finally could relax there in his arms.
- They stayed like that until the kids interrupted them. Will asked if everyone could come to sleep at their home. She wished she could

tell him yes, because she knew she also would feel better and safer if they all stay together after everything that happened that day. But she hadn't collect her wage yet and she didn't had food for everyone.

- Why don't you all stay at our place? - Hopper suggested like he had read her mind. - We have some extra rooms. - He justified.

- Yes, that's a good idea. - Eleven agreed with him. excited with the idea because until that moment only Max had stayed for a sleepover.

All the kids got into the car. Hopper opened the door of her car for her and gave her the keys of the house. They look each other for a moment and the intensity she found in his stare made her wished she could kissed him right there. But she didn't because the car was full of pre teens paying attention to what they were doing as they waited for her.

- We have to tell them about the mall and our suspicions about all this. - She said feeling it was time to talk with the kids about what they had been investigating.

. You are right. - He agreed with her. - Let's tell them at dinner. - He proposed.

- Okay. - She accepted. - Stay safe. - She requested.

- You too please. - He said with intensity.

He kissed her forehead and the shelter she found in that gesture almost made her heart explode. So before she did something stupid, like kissed him or telling him that she loved him, she got into the car and drove the kids to his home.

7. Something in the water (part 2)

At Hopper's home the kids went to play at Eleven's room. Joyce put her clothes to dry and dressed herself with some old clothe of Hopper. They probably looked ridiculous and big on her but she didn't care, they made her feel comfortable and safe, and she couldn't go around the house naked. She started dinner, she didn't want to intrude in the kids time and cooking always helped to distract her from the problems. She cooked fried chicken and fried potatoes hoping that some comfort food could help everyone feel a little better.

- Hey. - Hoper greeted her. - You didn't had to cook, we could had deliver something. - He said feeling bad at the idea of her to keep working even when she was not on her own house.

- Is okay, it was a good distraction. - She explained.

- Like you with my clothes. - He said flirting with her.

- Don't even start, i look ridiculous. - She laughed, surprised at the idea of him being distracted by her.

- You look to good to be ridiculous. - He flattered her.

That was it, she was going to kiss him. He couldn't say things like that and not expect her to have some kind of reaction. She grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, but the kids entered the kitchen interrupting the moment and making both of them jumped far from the other.

They ate dinner and told the kids everything about the mall and how they suspect that what's going on there it's probably related with the lab. They also talked about what had happened at the pool. The kids expressed their worries and theories. Hopper made them promise that they won't do anything stupid, that they will take care of each other, they won't risk people finding out who Eleven really was, and they will tell them if they found out something.

Once the dinner was over the kids went to keep playing for a while

and Hopper and Joyce set on the living room to watch some television. They found a movie from when they were teens and they joked about it.

- I should go. - Joyce said when she realized that she was sleepy. She was using Hopper's body as support, her head was on his shoulder, her legs over one of his, and her hands were holding his; and that was too comfortable.

- I think you should stay, it's late and you are tired. - He said softly as he watched her yawn.

- But i have work tomorrow. - She complained.

- But you are going to sleep better here, knowing the kids are okay. - He tried to reason with her. He knew her and he knew that if she came back home she wasn't going to sleep worrying after what happened at the pool.

She didn't answer because she knew he was right about that, so she just snuggled deeper into him. He held her and started playing with her hair. The last thing she tough before she fall asleep was that they should probably move, because it was not going to be comfortable to spend the night in the positions they were. But she felt too good, too safe, and that made her not wanting to move.

At the morning the kids found them sleeping in the couch.

- Should we wake them? - Lucas asked.

- I don't know. - Will answered feeling insecure about what to do. He never saw her mother being that close to a man, not even Bob.

- They can't be comfortable in the way they are sleeping. - Max said looking at the adults.

- Are they dating or something? - Dustin asked.

- No. - Eleven and Will answered at the same time, if they were they would know.

- But they love each other. - Eleven clarified.

- How do you know? - Mike asked.
- I just know, but it's complicated. - Eleven answered remembering what both had said to her.
- So, we're gonna be kinda brother and sister? - Will bright up at the idea.
- Yes. - Eleven said happily, she loved the Byers as her family.
- Maybe we should start breakfast? - Lucas suggested.

The kids woke up Hopper and Joyce for breakfast. Joyce had only half cup of coffee tough, because she was late for work, they had oversleep. She went home to grabbed her uniform and then went to the mall.

The daily routine kept going for the next days. But she suddenly realized that Will was starting to spend more time at home and less time with his friends. That made her worry. So, when on wednesday she found him at home when she came back from work, when she knew that day the party always go to the arcade she decided to confront him.

- Shouldn't you be at the arcade with your friends? - Joyce asked.
- They didn't go to the arcade today, they went to the lover's lake. - Will answered.
- Then why you aint there with them? - Joyce insisted, his son was not acting like him.
- I didn't want to go to the lake. - Will said looking disgusted at the idea.
- Okay. - Joyce accepted. - Do you want to help me with dinner? - She asked pointing at the kitchen, trying another approach to not pressure him to talk until he was ready.
- Yes. - He agreed. They started cooking in a comfortable silence..- Mike and I, we had a fight. - He finally admitted.

- I'm sorry sweetie, i know fights sucks. - She said. She knew Mike and Will were very good friends and knowing his son he was probably hurting about the fight. - Do you want to talk about it? - She asked giving him the choice to talk or not to.

- I wanted to go to the arcade, but he wanted to go to the lake. He said we're not kids anymore and we are not going to stay playing games all day. - He explained.

- Why didn't you wanted to go to the lake? - She asked because the kids have been going to the lake a lot this summer.

- Because after what happened at the pool, what if there is something in the water? What if the water is somehow related to the upside down? - He said sharing his fear.

She had to stop doing what she was doing, because she hadn't thought about it. She felt surprised at the idea, but it didn't sound crazy at all. She was glad his younger son was that smart and careful, but she didn't like seeing him scared. He started shaking a little, so she held his hand and made him sit down.

- Did you told that to Mike and the others? - She asked without letting go of his hand.

- No, i didn't want him to think that i'm scared. - He answered feeling ashamed.

- You should tell them. - She encouraged him. - Is okay to be scared. I got scared too sometimes. But we can't stop living because we are scared. - She said caressing his hand.

- Mom. - He started protesting.

- Will i'm serious about this. If it was for me i would keep you forever at home under my eyes if i knew that would keep you safe, but i know that's not safe nor healthy. You and i, we have to live our lives and for that we have to get out to the world. - She explained her point of view the best she could.

- And if something related to the upside down happens? - He asked.

- We deal with it when it happens. - She proposed.
- Okay. - He accepted.
- And we take care of each other, and that means we have to be honest and tell the other if something strange happens. - She added.
- I can do that, we can do that. - He agreed. - So you think i should tell my friends what i thought about the lake? - He asked.
- Yes. - She answered.
- Okay, i will. - He nodded. - Thanks mom. - He said as he hug her.

The next day she couldn't stop thinking about her talk with Will at work. Was the lover's lake a safe place? Should she let the kids go to the lake after Will's suspicions? Should she call Hopper to talk about it? Her thoughts went to other place when she saw two strange men dressed in black. She did the best she could to hear what they were talking about, without them noticing her. They talk about how good it was that the pool was going to be re open, about how they got what they wanted.

The public pool was going to be re open? How was that possible after what happened? She felt like she was going to start panicking. She tried to think logically, Hopper wouldn't let that happened, he wouldn't give the pool the permission to re open. Right? She needed answers, so in her lunch time she went to the police station.

- Hello. - Flo greeted her. - What can I do for you? - She asked stopping her.
- I need to talk to Hopper. - Joyce said going in direction of Hopper's office.
- You can't go now, he's in a reunion. - Flo said.
- The hell i can. - Joyce protested freing herself from the other.

She didn't care if Hopper was in a reunion, what she needed was more important and he will have to understand that. She didn't let Flo stop her and got into his office without even knockin the door.

She was surprised when she realized that the person that was having a reunion with him was the mayor.

- Joyce what are you doing? - Hopper asked surprised at her interruption. - We are in a reunion, you should wait for me outside.. - He said.

- Is it true that the public pool is being re open? - She asked, without caring to do what he said.

- Yes. - He answered.

- Why would you let that happened? - She asked feeling angry. - There is something in the water! You know it's not safe! - She exclaimed.

- It is safe, we make sure of that, so don't worry. - Larry said. - What happened was just a misunderstood, a filtration that made the pool drain. - He explained.

- You are wrong. I was there, you were not. There was something in the water, something that made Heather disappear. Is not safe to re open the pool. - She argued, feeling desperate to make her point valid.

- There is nothing wrong with the water. - Larry assured her. - But i can see now why most people think you are crazy. - He pushed.

- Who the hell you think you are?! - She said exploiting.

That was it. She was not going to let anyone disrespect her like that. She didn't care that he was the mayor, that was just a title and didn't give him the right to be such an asshole. She took a step in his direction to gave him a peace of her mind, but Hopper grabbed her arm to stop her. She took a deep breath because now she was frustrated with him too. Why was he acting like this? Like she didn't matter?

- We should go to see what you wanted me to. - Hopper said to the mayor changing the topic.

- Let's go. - Larry accepted as he stood up.

- Wait me here so we can talk. - Hopper said to her in a very quiet tone, so only she could hear him.
- Ms byers, it was a pleasure. - Larry said in a way of parting.
- Wish i could say it was mutual, but i would be lying. - She said, feeling even more angry when Hopper sent her a warning look.

When Hopper and Larry left she let herself fall. She couldn't breath. Her body started shaking and her mind wouldn't stop. This couldn't be happening. She set down on the floor trying to calmed herself. The methods of breathing and focusing on the present space around her weren't working and she started having a panic attack. She could slowly felt how things around her started vanishing. Flo found her like that and helped her came back to the present.

- Thank you. - Joyce thanked her, accepting the glass of water the other offered.
- You're welcome. - Flo said. - I don't know what happened there, but i know Hopper cares about you. So you should try not to worry that much, wherever it is he's gonna help you. - She tried to make her feel better.
- You're right. - Joyce agreed.
- You can wait for him here if you want. - Flo suggested.
- No, i have to go. - She said sharply. She looked at the clock in the wall and saw that her lunch time was over. - Thank you, but i have to go. - She said and left Flo in Hopper's office.

She went back to work. She tried to do the most things she could to kept her mind busy. She needed to stop thinking negatively, so she worked a lot, she did everything her coworkers didn't want to do. She overtired herself, but it felt good to not have time to stop and think. When her shift was over she left the mall the faster she could, she really needed to smoke. She lighted a cigarette and finally relax; at least until she saw that Hopper was waiting her in the parking lot by her car.

- What are you doing here? - She asked surprised, because she hadn't

been waiting for him to show up.

- You didn't wait for me. - He answered looking her with some kind of worry.
- I had to come back to work. - She justified, and it was actually true.
- I know. - He assisted. - We need to talk. - He said.
- Hop i'm tired, all i want to do is go home, have dinner with my sons and sleep. - She protested and tried to find a excuse, because she didn't know if she was ready to talk.
- Please. - He insisted offering her his hand.
- Fine. - She accepted and took his hand, she didn't have the energy to fight about it. - What about my car? - She asked as he guided her to his truck.
- We'll come for it later. - He answered.

They drove in silence. She watched at him at some times and she could felt like he was as tired as she was, he looked also very tense. What was going on? He drove deep into the forest. If she was with another person she would probably would feel uncomfortable and unsafe, but with him it was different. She knew he was taking them there because it was probably the only place they could really talk without risking anyone hearing them. He stopped the truck at an opening. They set on the truck's box and they shared a cigarette as they watched the first stars appear on the summer sky.

- What the hell is going on? - She asked when she realized that he wasn't going to be the one to start the conversation.
- What happened... - He started talking but she interrupted him.
- Why would you even agree on re opening the pool?! Why would you let that man treat me like i'm crazy?! Why didn't you let me defend myself?! - She throw at him all the things that had her mad since she left the police station.
- Hey, calm down. Is okay, you have to breath. - He remembered her

and held her hand. - Believe me, there is nothing i would like better than see you kicking Larry's as, but he's the mayor, if i had let you do that he would have press charges against you and we don't need that to happen. I can't deal with that. - He tried to reason with her.

- He deserved it. - She complained.

- He did, but we have to be careful here. - He reason with her.

- Because he is helping the lab and whoever is behind all this mess? - She asked trying to guess his suspicions.

- Yes, this people are dangerous, we need to keep low profile. - He answered.

- Why did you let them re open the pool? - She asked needing to make sure that he was on her side on this.

- That's not on my power, Larry as the mayor can take those decision even if the police suggest not to. - He explained feeling frustrated.

- It's not safe, there was something in the water and it can come back at any moment. - She said feeling angry as she thought about what happened and about how Will was scared now of the water.

- I know. - He agreed with her.

- What are we going to do? - She asked, she needed to know that he had a plan, that they could do something to try to make things better.

- The best i can do for now is to make sure that one of my men are always going to be at the pool and they will report to me if something strange happens. - He said.

- I'm tired, i want this to be over. - She expressed her feelings. This day had make her feel at the edge.

- I want this to be over too. - He said with sincerity.

He hugged her then and she let herself relax. They were together on this. Wherever was going on they were going to confront it together. And it felt good to do it together, to had someone, to not be alone.

She could fight alone. She did it most of her life. She could hang out, she was strong. But it felt good to have someone, and it felt even better that he was that someone. She knew he would go to the end of the world for her and for her sons. And she was starting to realise that she would also go to the end of the world for him and for Eleven. That's what family meant to her and it warmed her heart that she started thinking about Hopper and Eleven as a part of it.

- Let's go to your home and have dinner. - He suggested when he felt her yawn.

- What about El? - She asked.

- I left her at your home before coming get to you. - He answered.

They went to her home and have dinner. Joyce tried to appreciate everything that happened that night, feeling the need to hang on to the good memories. They five of them spending time together really felt like a family and she loved that.

8. The past comes knocking at your door

Will was ready to go to Mike's house. His friends were having a meeting there. At first he wasn't sure, but Max had called and told him they miss him. And Joyce and Jonathan had advised him to go. They both were at work now. He was bored and the truth was that he missed his friends too. So he decided it was time for him to confront them after their kinda fight.

But when he open the door of his home he found two persons waiting there, his dad and the man of the vision he had days ago. Did Lonnie deserved to still be called dad by him? He wasn't sure. What he did know was that he was never there. Will suddenly felt scared, like he could feel that wherever reason they had to be there wasn't good.

- Hey Will. - Lonnie greeted him.
- Hi. - Will greeted him back. - What are you doing here? - He asked.
- I come to see you and Jonathan, i miss you. - Lonnie answered like it should be obvious.
- Jonathan's at work and I'm going to Mike's to meet my friends. - Will said trying to pass him by to get his bike.
- But i'm here. - Lonnie protested grabbing his arm.
- Who's him? - Will asked, changing the topic.
- I'm Liam, your grandfather. - The man presented himself.
- I thought your dad was dead. - Will said to Lonnie. Had he lied about something like that?
- He's not my dad, he's your mom's dad. - Lonnie explained.
- Well i have to go to Mike's, they're waiting for me. - Will insisted, he didn't feel comfortable around them, he wanted to go.
- Then give us the keys of the house. - Lonnie said.

- Are you serious? - Will asked surprised. - There's no one at home, i can't let you stay. - He said after he saw his dad was serious about what he was asking.

- Come on, i'm here and this is my home. I'll wait for you and Jonathan to come back. - Lonnie tried to convince him.

- This is not your home anymore, and you are never here, you didn't even come back when you found out i wasn't dead. - Will said angrily.

Lonnie slapped him hard on the face. It hurted, but he did like it didn't. He didn't wanted to give him a reason to feel proud of himself for making him feel bad. His dad loved making other people feel bad, but Will was determined not to gave him that. He felt blood on his nose. This was not good. His mother and his brother were going to be furious when they found out. But he didn't want them to stay, he was worried about his vision. So he tried to get to his bike again, but Liam stopped him and between him and Lonnie pushed him back inside his house.

- You see what i have to deal with. - Lonnie said to Liam.

- He's just as trouble as his mother, isn't him? - Liam said making a weird sound, like a laugh.

They opened some beers and they also grabbed some whisky his mother had. They made lot of noise, they played a game with cards and laugh a lot. Will stayed sitting on the couch in silence, watching them. He started thinking, he needed to find a way out of this situation. But before he could get an idea, his mother was back. What was she doing back home when she only have been gone for like three hours? She was so distracted that didn't even realised there were people in her living room, she just went right to her bedroom.

- Mom. - He called her, standing from the couch.

- Will? - She asked surprised. - I thought you were at mike's. - She said from her room.

- I hadn't go yet. - He said, keeping his voice high so she could hear

him. - What are you doing here? - He asked.

- I forgot my work identification, so they asked me to come for it. - She answered. - Want me to give you a ride? - She offered appearing again in the living room, she had put her id in the shirt of her uniform.

Will went right to her and hug her with all his strengths. He could tell that her mom was surprised about the hug, but she hugged him back and caressed his back. He felt safe now, she always made him feel safe. But he was worried about his vision, he wanted to take his mother away from Lonnie and Liam.

- Are you okay? - She asked breaking the hug so she could see him.

- I am now. - He answered.

- What happened? - She asked worried as she saw he had blood on his face.

- Hey Joyce. - Lonnie said getting her attention.

Joyce felt herself froze as she finally realised Lonnie was there. The worst part was that he wasn't alone, he was with her father. She stayed for a minute looking at them in shock. How she hadn't see them when she came into her home? What they were doing here and together? This couldn't be good. And Will's nose was bleeding, had one of them hit him? She got furious thinking about that.

- Did you hit my son? - Joyce asked going to where Lonnie was.

- Is our son, and he deserved it. - Lonnie answered

She slapped him on his cheek. If someone there deserved to be slapped it was definitely Lonnie, not his son. Who did he think he was? He didn't deserve to have such as good son as Will, but he didn't care, he didn't even really know him. And he came back, what for? To treated him like shit? She won't let him hurt his son more than he already had, not even over her dead body.

- I can see he learn of your ways. - Lonnie said looking at her mad.

- If you ever hit him again i will kill you. - She threatened him.
- I would like to see you try that. - Lonnie said laughing.
- I see you haven't changed at all. Still a firecracker, ain't you? - Liam asked with a twisted smile.
- Fuck you! - She exclaimed. - What are you doing here? What do you want? - She questioned them.
- Lonnie came to see his sons and I came to see my daughter. - Liam answered.
- You expect me to believe that when i haven't seen you for twenty years? - She asked him. - What are you doing here? Don't make me ask again. - She warned.
- I want to sell the house. - Liam answered.
- What? - She asked confused and surprised at what she just had heard.
- This house is mine, i have the papers. - He remembered her.
- If this is your house why i am the one i've been paying the bills since i'm sixteen? - She said angrily. - This house is mine and my sons, get out! - She argued.
- Don't make me go to the justice, because i'm going to win, i have the title of the property. - He said pressuring her.
- You would do that? You would let me and my sons on the streets? - She asked feeling herself crushed inside. - And you would let him do that? Why? Is he going to give you part of the money? - She interrogated Lonnie.
- Well, i have debts, so all money can help. - Lonnie admitted.

She couldn't believe this was her life. Loonie, her ex husband was plottin with her father. She shouldn't be surprised, but somehow it still fucking hurt. She could see the similarity between them now, they were both alcohol users and liked betting their money. Lonnie,

her ex husband, the one that had become an alcoholic when he lost his job and couldn't find a new one, the one who started acting violent when she reproached him about spending the money she gain at work in bets, the one who left when she made him choose between going to rehab for their family or break away. But he had been good at first, she actually thought that she had loved him once, a long time ago... And then, there was Liam. Her father, the one who had left when she was seventeen, the one who had been an alcohol and a violent person since her mother died, the one who has mistreated lot and lot of times. She never had thought about them being abusive because she could defend herself, she always fought back; but for some reason she was the one who always ended hurting the most. But seeing them both together made her realised how much of a mess she was with both of them. Why was this happening? Why bad things keep happening all around her? Why life could just not give her a break?

- Will go to mike's. - She asked his son.
- But mom, they... - He protested. He didn't like the idea of letting her mom alone with those two men.
- I need you to do this for me, go. - She pleased him. - I trust that you can take care of yourself, so you have to trust that i can take care of myself too. - She insisted.
- Okay. - He accepted.

Her son left and she felt like she could breath a little more calmer again. At least she knew he was safe, away from this mess now. She was ready to things come bad from this and that scared her.

They argued, they fought, they screamed a lot. They will never get to agreement were she would get something good out of it. Things were getting rougher every minute that passed and she knew you couldn't win this fight alone.

- Get out of my house! - She said for a million time.
- This is my house! - Liam insisted as he pushed the table making all the things on it fall with a chaotic sound.

- That it's, if you don't get out i'm calling the police. - She said going to get the phone.
 - Don't you even dare, i'm not in the mood to see Hopper. - Lonnie warned, grabbing the phone and taking it out of the wall before she could get to it.
 - What the fuck?! You'll pay for that phone. - She complained to Lonnie about what he just did.
 - You know, even if you get the police here, the paper of this house are under my name, i would win. - Liam said enjoying the situation.
 - You would love that, wouldn't you? Leaving me and my sons on the streets. - She said bitter.
 - Don't be so dramatic, you have a job. - Lonnie said.
 - I still can't believe you are defending him, but of course you are on his side for the money, of course this is my life. - She reproached him. - You are both really naive if you think the money i earn at work is enough for me to pay or rent anything in this town. - She admitted, trying to make them reason.
 - That's not our problem. - Liam said.
 - And it's not my problem that any of you has money or a job! - She fought back.
 - If the house is that important to you, then just give us the money we need and we'll leave. - Liam proposed.
 - Are you stupid or you are just not pay attention? I don't have the money! - She exclaimed angrily. - And even if i had it i wouldn't give it to you. - She said honestly.
- He throw a bottle at her, which she luckily stopped with her arm protecting her face. Her arm was bleeding, there were lots of pieces of glass around the floor and she had lost the little patience she had left. She knew things were only getting worse and she didn't know what to do to make them stop. She just wished Will would get help for her soon.

Will drove his back the faster he could, his heart beating loudly at all his efforts. He needed to get help. He got to Mike's house and saw his friends in the front door. As they saw him they all came to meet him.

- You came. - Max said with a smile.
- Yes, i wanted to come sooner but i was stuck with a problem. - Will said looking around for Eleven, but she wasn't there.
- I'm sorry about the fight, it wasn't nice what i said to you. - Mike apologized.
- I'm sorry too. - Will admitted. - Is Jane here? - He asked.
- No, she hadn't arrived yet. - Lucas answered.
- Where are you going? - Dustin asked stopping Will's bike. He just got to Mike with Steve.
- I don't have time for this, i'm dealing with a red code. - Will said.
- Is that why your nose is bleeding? What's going on? - Lucas asked concerned.
- My dad is back. - He answered.

He was about to explain everything when the police van of Hopper appeared on the street and parked in front of them. Eleven went out of the car carrying two big bags with her.

- Sorry i'm late, i wanted to bring some snacks. - She explained. - Will? - She asked worried as his friend ran to the van.

All the kids followed him, but he didn't care, he needed Hopper. He peeked out to the window's car so he could talk to the chief. He was sure he would help, if Eleven's was right he loved her mother, so... He just hope they wouldn't get too late.

- I need help. - Will said.
- What's wrong? - Hopper asked feeling worried as he saw blood on Will's face.

- My dad is back and he is with my grandfather. - Will started explaining.
- With Liam? He is back? - Hopper asked surprised. He remembered how much he made Joyce suffered when they were teens.
- Yes. - Will answered. - They are with mom, and they want our house, and they are going to hurt her if we don't help her. - He ended his explanation.
- Don't worry, i'm going to get her. - Hopper said turning on the van's engine.
- I'm going. - Will said opening the door and getting inside the van.
- Kid, i don't think that's a good idea. - Hopper protested.
- She's my mom, i'm going. - Will said with determination.

Hopper couldn't convinced Will otherwise, so he let him and the rest of the kids and Steve go with him, but made them promise they will do what he said. In the way to the Byers's home they encountered with Jonathan and Nancy, they followed them to the house in Jonathan's car. When they got to the Byers's home they could heard the shouts coming from inside. They started planning what to do as they went out of their vehicles, when a loud noise made them all of them paralyzed. Hopper swear he could felt his heart stopped at it. It was a gunshot, he just hoped that whoever had .

9. Keep holding on

That was a shot, right? Had he heard right? When he saw all the reactions from the kids he realized that he in fact had heard right. Fuck! What if Joyce...? No, he couldn't think like that, he had to be react quickly. He couldn't think in the worst way because that would destroy him and the kids didn't need to see that, he needed to hold on. He could still shouts coming from inside the house, so that was good, that meant they were still there fighting, alive. He saw Jonathan going to the front door at full speed, but he stopped him, he couldn't let him got into the fire.

- You are not going anywhere. - Hopper said pushing Jonathan out of the way.
- You can't tell me what to do! She's my mum! - Jonathan argued angrily.

He couldn't let Jonathan into the house, into a probably crime scene. Joyce would never want any of her sons to put himself on danger for her. And it was not just about doing what he thought Joyce would want, it was that he really cared for Jonathan and Will too. He loved those kids and he realised he wanted to protect them, just as much as he always wanted to protect Eleven.

- And i'm the chief, so let me handle it! - Hopper argued back. - I promise i'll let you all in once everything is clear and she's okay. - He assured to try to calm him down.
- I'm going, i can use my powers to stop them. - Eleven said interrupting them.
- No way, those men are not the kind of people i want them to know about your powers. - Hopper said .
- He's right, we can't trust them. - Will said holding Eleven's hand.
- Fine. - Eleven accepted.
- Nancy you still know how to use a gun? - Hopper asked.

- Yes. - Nancy answer.
 - Good, then you're coming with me. - He said giving her his second gun. - Steve stay here and make sure no one enters the house until i say so, okay? - He gave his last order.
 - Okay, i'll do. - Steve assisted.
- The first thing he saw when he got inside the house was glasses all over the floor, and then he saw Joyce. She was alive and that made him feel like he could breathe again. But not for long if he didn't do anything to stop what was happening. Lonnie had her stuck to the wall and was strangling her, and Liam was pointing them with a gun as he said words of encourage for Lonnie.
- This is the police, Lonnie stop and Liam put your gun down! - He ordered loudly so they could heard him.
- The moment of surprise made Lonnie stop, so Joyce pushed him away from her and punched him in the face with all her strengths. He felt proud of her in that moment, that she still could find strength in the situation to keep fighting. He saw that Lonnie's nose started bleeding and for the way he was cursing he hoped his nose was broken. He went to him, pushed him to the floor and handcuffed him.
- Are you okay? - He asked, turning to Joyce because she was all he cared about.
 - Yes. - She answered in a broken voice, still trying to catch her breath.
 - Put your gun down. - He ordered getting back to confront Liam. Nancy had been pointing him all the time with the gun he gave her, and he felt glad that he chose her as backup because she was holding the situation really well.
 - Hi Jimmy. - Liam greeted him with a teasing smile.
 - Don't call me like that. - Hopper said.
 - I was surprised when i found out you are the chief of police, i thought that you didn't wanted to be like your father. - Liam said as

he look at Hopper upside down.

- Just because i have the same profession he had doesn't mean i'm like him. - Hopper argued. - Now put your gun down. - He repeated his order.

- Don't be so dramatic, is not like i've hurt somebody. - Liam said laughing. - Or maybe i could. - He said pointing Joyce.

- Put your gun down. - Hopper said standing between Joyce and his father. - Don't make me repeat it again. - He pressured.

- Fine, here you have. - Liam accepted, he put the gun on the floor and kicked it to where Hopper was.

- What the hell? - Hopper asked when he grabbed the gun and realized it wasn't actually a real one.

- It's just a toy, a very good imitation of a real gun, even sounds like it, don't you think? - Liam rumbled.

- Oh my god! That's hilarious! - Lonnie said laughing.

- Shut up! - Nancy said disgusted with all that was happening.

Hopper went to Liam and handcuffed him too. As he was dealing with him the kids got into the house, Jonathan and Will went running to their mum and hug her. He wanted to schooled all of them for not waiting him to give the okay, but he didn't. Liam and Lonnie where still there and he didn't wanted to do that infront of them, and also he could understand the anxiety of the kids, the need to know that Joyce was okay.

- Joyce do you need me to take you to the hospital? - He asked. She was his priority, so if she thought she needed to be check by a doctor he would take her to a hospital first, and then he would deal with Liam and Lonnie.

- No, i'm okay. - Joyce answered, still wrapped between her sons. Eleven had joined the hug too.

- Are you sure? - He insisted because he could see her arm was still

bleeding.

- It's just superficial. - Joyce said following his thoughts.
- I'll take care of it, mom had teached me first aid. - Nancy offered. Her mother had studied nursery, so she had learn some tips from her.
- Okay, i'll take them to the station and then i'll be back. - Hopper informed.
- You don't need to do that, she won't press charges. - Liam said triggering him. Of course he would said that, that was he said when they were teens everytime Hopper tried to convince Joyce that she didn't deserve to be mistreated by her father.
- I'm pressing charges for damaging my house, and hurting Will and me. Also i want restrictions orders for both of them from my sons and me. - Joyce said with confidence.
- Woow, i didn't know you have that in you. - Liam said faking admiration.
- Go to hell, i don't want to see you ever again. - She said sharp.
- This house will be mine and there's nothing you can do to stop me! - He shouted as Hopper pushed him out of the house.

Only when Liam and Lonnie were out of her home, Joyce could finally let herself releaf all the pression and the tension. She felt herself start shaking. God, she was a mess. She felt she could break at every moment, and she didn't wanted to have a panic attack infront of all the kids. So, to distract herself and stayed focus on the present, she started picking up the glasses with her hands. But the kids stopped her, and before she could fight about it she found herself being guided by Nancy to the bathroom. Nancy made her sat in the toilet lid and then started looking for what she needed to clean Joyce's bound.

- This is going to hurt. - Nancy warned.
- Is okay, i've had worse. - Joyce said.

Why the hell did she say that? She knew she was a mess, she knew that she never gave the best impression, but this was another level of failure. She didn't wanted people to feel sorry for her. Her life had been definitely hard on her, but she had hold on, she was still holding on, and she probably will keep holding on. Her life was a constant holding on. However she never used that as a excuse for anything, because she didn't wanted to be defined by it.

She started thinking about Liam and Lonnie, and she got lost in her head, lost in all the bad memories she had with them. She felt like a black hole was sucking her and she needed to stop it, so she focused on Nancy. Nancy was good. She watched as the young woman cleaned her bound softly.

- How long has been since you and Jonathan are dating? - Joyce asked, trying to distract herself.

- Six months. - Nancy answered.

- Is he good to you? - Joyce asked, feeling curious about how his older son was in a relationship. She had tried to teach his sons to be good and respectful with women, so she can only hope they did.

- Yes, he is. - Nancy noded. - He's probably the best guy i know in this town, he and Will, they are both really good persons. You did good. - She flattered with a smile.

- I don't know about that. Specially with Jonathan, i wish he hadn't have to grow up so fast, i wish i could have done better for him. - Joyce rambled.

- What you did and what you do is good enough. - Nancy assured.

- You are good to him, he's so happy with you. - Joyce said looking at the other with intensity. - Thank you for making him happy. - She expressed her gratitude.

- Well he's good for me too, we make each other happy. - Nancy said honestly.

When Nancy ended treating her bund she thanked her and then went to change her clothes. Her shirt and her jean were stained with blood

and she didn't feel okay with keep wearing them. When she left her room to go to wash her clothes she found her living room all cleaned, the kids had done that for her and she felt overwhelmed with gratitude. She thanked them. And she thanked them again when they didn't let her wash her clothe, Jonathan took them from her and said he would handle it. The kids convinced her to watch a movie with them, so she let them dragged her to the couch and watched Stars Wars for what it felt like a million time, they really were fans of that movie.

Hopper took Liam and Lonnlie to the police station and put them behind bars. He made sure of processed them and made the papers needed to present so Joyce could get the restrictions orders she asked for. Once it was all ready, he went to buyed some pizza and then drove back to the Byers's house. He found everyone watching Star Wars. He looked at Joyce and he felt happy as he saw her surrounded with so much love. She was sitting in the coach between Will and Eleven, both of them had their heads resting in her shoulders, and Jonathan was sitting on the floor. with his back resting on her legs. Is like all of them needed to be near her to made sure she was okay. He could understand them perfectly, because he felt the same. He watched them for a moment and appreciated his little family. He never thought that he would love again and so much, but here he was, full of love for all of them that he actually thought he may explode sometimes. He was good at hiding and denying his feelings, but with them he was starting to realize that maybe it was okay to not to.

The moment was lost when Dustin realized he was there. They all went excited to get the pizza. He was ready to follow the kids to the kitchen, but Joyce got his attention asking for a cigarette first. So he went with her outside to share a cigarette. They smoked in silence. He watched her and thanked all the gods in the world that she was alive. It had been hard to think in the possibility that today he could had lost her forever. He wanted to tell her he love her, but she had said she was not ready to hear it yet. He was following her lead, he just needed to be patient.

- How are you holding on? - He asked, breaking the silence.
- I don't know, i just keep holding on, not sure how, but here i am. -

She answer sincerely. - Did you left them detained? - She asked.

- Yes. - He answered.

- I don't know what i'm gonna do, i don't have money for a trail and i don't have anywhere else to go or money to get a new place. - She confessed, letting out her worries.

- Hey, we'll figure it out. - He assured her, trying to calmed her. - I have a friend that is a lawyer, maybe she can help if i asked her. - He suggested.

- I can't pay her. - She remembered him.

- Is okay, she owes me some favors. - He explained.

- Okay. - She accepted.

When they ended the cigarette he found himself invading her personal space, he caressed her neck with his hands. The marks of Lonnie's fingers were starting to show on her skin and that made him angry, so he caressed them so she could know that his touch would never hurt her like that. She joined his front and nose with him, putting herself in tiptoes to do it, which he found really cute. For a moment he thought she was going to kiss him, but she didn't, she hug him instead. He hug her back, glad he got her there with him. He kissed her head trying to show her his love, and that with it comes protection.

- We should get inside before they ate all the pizza. - He said making her laugh.

He took her hand and guided to her kitchen. Nancy gave them both plates with three pieces of pizza in each one. Will asked Joyce to sit next to him, so she did. Hopper smiled when he saw Eleven leaving her place and putting her chair in the other side of Joyce, because of course she also wanted to sit next to her. Jonathan complained making everyone laugh. Joyce's eyes were sparkling again and there was a little but honest smile on her face. He realized how screw he was as he watch them, he love the kids so much and he loved Joyce so much. He loved how the kids made Joyce happy. She was the

happier version of herself with them and that made him soft. He admired the strength she had for letting them make her happy in that moment, even after all the mess she had been through that day. He loved how happy they were all together.

The next day he met with Joyce in the police station to have a reunion with Emily, the lawyer. He could tell she was nervous,

- Are you sure this is a good idea? Did you sleep with her? - She questioned.

- Hey don't worry about it, is not like that, we parted in a good way. - He answered.

- Shit, this is gonna be so awkward, won't be? Maybe we should go. - She rumbled.

He could read all the frustrations writing on her face. Her cheeks turned red and he found that kinda cute. Was she scared, jealous or just nervous? He probably will never know because that was the moment Emily chose to appear.

Luckily Emily and Joyce got along pretty well, and he could see how Joyce finally relax when she realized Emily was serious about this. Joyce told her all her story with Liam and Lonnie. Emily said that if Liam had the title of the house by his name there wasn't much they could do. The restrictions orders and making Lonnie pay for child support were possible. Emily said she would call them when she had studied everything to propose what Joyce's best options were. Joyce thanked them both and left because if not she was going to be late to work.

She kissed him on the cheek goodbye and that made him smile like a fool. He should learn to control his emotions, he was the chief of police for fucking sake.

- She's good for you. - Emily said after Joyce had left. - Maybe too good, she's probably out of your league. - She joked, but at the same time she was being honest.

- Is not like that, we aren't together. - He said feeling frustrated.

- But you love her. - She stated.
 - I do. - He confirmed. He didn't know why, but he had the need to let that clear.
 - So what's stopping you? - She asked with curiosity.
- She's been through enough bullshit in her life, had suffered a lot. And she's dealing with lot of staffs. I don't want her to pressure her, i want to wait until she's ready and sure. - He explained the best he could. He was not comfortable talking about his feelings with anyone.

- Like i said, she's good, love's good for you. - She said.

Yes, Joyce was good for him, he knew that. But love? He had been thinking a lot about it lately. He didn't think love was going to be good, because love had only made him suffer, love had only made him fall in a black hole. Maybe Joyce was not the only one who needed to get ready, maybe he needed too. Being a dad figure to Eleven had made him open his heart again, but was he ready to open it to a couple relationship again? He knew he love her, so there wasn't anything he could do to avoid it or denied it, he was way past over that. He loved her and the realization of that love surprisingly made him want to try again. Then yes, maybe he was ready afterall.